



## **Break Point and the Handicap System (Thailand Case Study)** **(An alternative approach to judge the winning birds in pigeon racing)** **by Sornthep Gomutputra - s\_gomutputra@yahoo.com**

Pigeon racing which had its birth place in Europe over a century ago has become a favorite hobby for millions of people around the globe. Breeding, training, feeding and racing techniques have also evolved with the changing and improving knowledge and technology. Nowadays, fanciers can obtain off spring of the long dead famous stud cock from his frozen semen. DNA samples can be compared to that of the original parents to confirm the blood line. Chick sex can be identified a few days before it was borne using chemical to test the female hormone level in egg fluid. Electronic clocking system using the contactless identification technology is quickly replacing the conventional mechanical clocks. New invention also makes it possible to mount a light weight GPS recording device on the back of a pigeon during its flight which enables the plotting of its flight path with amazing accuracy. Computer and racing software can sort out information and data in any manner to produce and send race results on line or via cell phones. It can produce statistical references and run race simulations incorporating changes of coordinates, break points, release times and/or distances, etc... Despite all these developments there is one very important aspect

in pigeon racing that has not yet caught up with time and technology. That is the method generally used to judge the winning pigeons. Presently, the most acceptable system is to calculate the fastest speed (meters or yards per minute) by dividing direct air distance from race point to loft by the total time a pigeon took to arrive home. This sounds a lot better and more civilized than the olden day practice of the fanciers running or riding bicycles with their pigeons or the rubber bands in hands to the club. However, we can still hear fanciers saying something like, "I should have won the race had the wind not blown to John Doe's location", or, "John Doe should be excluded from our club because our pigeons have to circumvent the Rocky mountains in favor of John Doe's direction".

These complaints have merits and clearly suggest that there is a dilemma in the core of pigeon racing game. That is the wind and geographical layouts are the most important factors in separating champions from losers especially for short and middle distance up to 500-600 km races in normal weather. Yet there is no practical solution. The general corrective measure is to break up the region in to zones or to alternate race points left or right of the home base

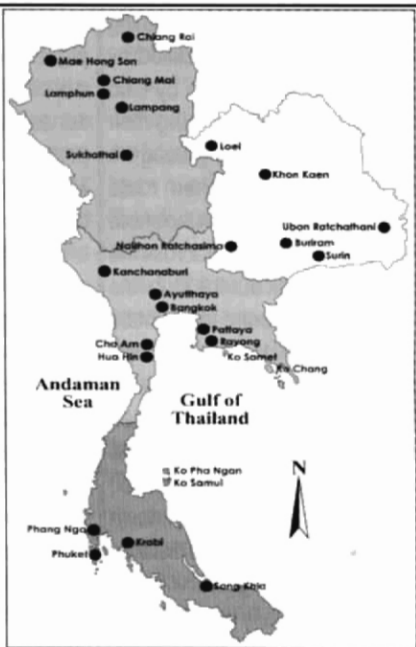
with the intention to even out the chances of winning among lofts situated in different locations. In countries where pigeon racing has evolved into serious gambling, a club's racing parameter might be limited to only 5 km frontage and 5 km depth. Despite this limitation, there are still arguments on location advantage. Using conventional air distance has its flaw when measuring direct distance between two coordinates across a long span over the sea where there is a parallel coastline or islands close to the flight line. If pigeons have the option to cling to the coast line regardless of the wind or the drag, they are smart enough not to fly directly across a long distance home for obvious reasons. Flying across a high mountain range is neither their option if there is a reachable and manageable peak or passage channel to fly through. Fighting side wind is another thing most pigeons can not manage without losing speed or direct bearing to loft. Therefore, it is not fair to the pigeons or to most fanciers involved if we are to expect that the pigeons will follow the straight line drawn by human being across the sea or terrain pigeons can not pass or to fight strong seasonal side wind. Flying back from north to south with strong NE side wind, the flock





will arrive home from the west or the NW direction in favor of lofts lining the western end of the club's boundary. This is a simple 101 physics theory one can hardly argue. There might be some rare exception to the aforesaid situation due to other unforeseen factors, but we are talking about the most likely scenario which can be supported by empirical data or statistics or even visual observation. Putting aside personal interest, one should look at the big picture especially when managing a club. We should think beyond the box and try to find a more equitable and fairer system although pigeon racing can never be a perfectly fair game. It is just a matter of just how close we can get to the ideal situation so that every one has more or less equal hope on race days. We all are frustrated to see fanciers migrate or relocate their lofts to one end of the city just to take full advantage of the flight path at the expenses of fellows who can not move. This is particularly true when there is big money involved. As in some other sports like golf, a friendly betting adds more fun to the game but heavy gambling would induce vices and tarnish the good side of the hobby. All pigeon clubs' charters are not designed to run gambling dens especially if it is registered as an association or national federation. It is the big gamblers who have already moved and they would make the

loudest noise if any proposed change would reduce their gained advantages. In Thailand, we have also been facing the situation where fanciers are moving to the west end of the club boundary to take advantage of the northeasterly wind which prevails during the main racing season from the north routes to Bangkok. They also have an absolute advantage racing from the south because air distances are



measured directly from race points along the southern peninsular across the sea to Bangkok (which is northeast to those race points) while it is not possible for pigeons to follow that line. Pigeons have to follow the coast line northwards and then enter the city from the SW end. This has made it difficult for fanciers in the middle and the eastern end of the boundary causing most them not to participate. The end result is the dwindling numbers of fanciers. At the end of the day, there will be only a small group of fanciers racing among themselves in the west end zone and they would still be arguing who has the advantage of being closer to the west border line. (To have a clear picture of our geographical location, one should see the map of Thailand by visiting [www.asiatravel.com/thaimap.html](http://www.asiatravel.com/thaimap.html))

To mitigate this problem, the Thai Racing Pigeon Federation has recently adopted the 'break point' concept which has already been used in some countries such as South Africa where the racing software named 'Winbird' designed by Johann Stegmann is recognized as an official program which any one can get a free download from his web site.

This software can sum up the constant distance from a liberating point to a chosen break point and the distance from there to each individual loft. Break point is coordinates of geographical spot members agree to adopt as a location where most flocks of returning pigeons start to





break or separate before heading homes. This can be justified by decades of observation by club liberators, fanciers training their birds, and fanciers living along the cost line. For our southern route races, this location is on the shore line of about 80 km SE across the sea to Bangkok but the club has chosen 90 km point to maintain some usual advantage to the west end lofts. Further more these loft still have further privileges because break point will not be used until for races of around 300 km and further. It is a well known fact that from these middle distance races almost all pigeons will drop for fresh water any where from a popular sea side tourist town name Hua Hin, 140 km southwest of Bangkok, to several locations before and beyond the break point. It is now a big business for people and fanciers in these areas to spread out their nets around fresh water sources and sometimes swimming pools to trap the tiring pigeons. Racing from the south route is in mid summer with burning heat and high humidity. It is noteworthy that races results using break point concept shows that top positions are not heavily concentrated in the western zone but are evenly distributed among all zones from west to east. Simulation by computer using past data of races results also shows similar pattern. Speeds of winning pigeons are very close together while race closing times are also

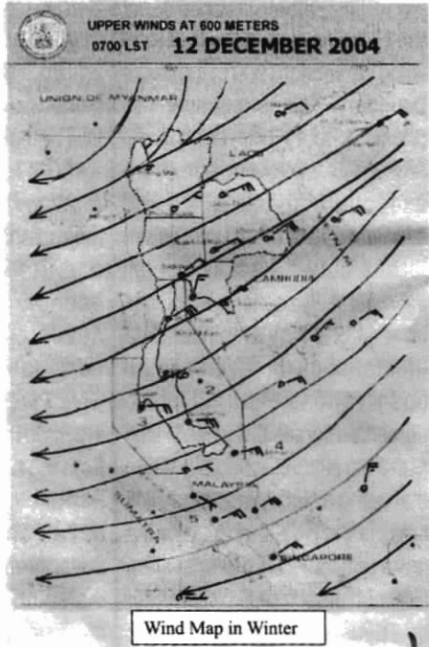
shorter meaning pigeons in the usually disadvantageous zones are now in the prizes.

Marking an inland break point can be a bit subjective in a situation where there is no high mountain range or other geographical surrounding to funnel the flocks through a certain passage. Therefore, the pigeons should have more options as to where and when they would start to break.

Theoretically, pigeons

from the front zone should break earlier if they are not dragged away by the main flock which, unfortunately, is the usual complaint of the front-enders. This may requires several break points along the same line in one race. However, this problem is not a big factor if the front boundary line is not too far away from the back end, (20-30 km should be acceptable). In final analysis, the laws of physics still prevail. Most pigeons will be blown to the west if they are flying from north to south with NE side wind. One should look for an article written by a noted Belgian fancier and writer, Antoon Mofait, who very well described the effect of wind on flight path. Using his wind vectors theory, he could predict the areas where the winning pigeons would belong to given the speed and direction of the wind. In land break point is totally inapplicable in countries where there is no dominant and predictable seasonal wind.

In Thailand during the four months north route or winter racing season from October through the end of January, the monsoon wind is always from the northeast with velocity between 15-35 km/hour. This is as sure as the sun would rise from the east unless there is a rare happening of off season depression or storm. The wind map at 600 meter altitude posted daily on website of the weather bureau will show the same pattern of NE wind for this whole period (see [www.tmd.go.th](http://www.tmd.go.th)).





Monsoon is an Arabic word meaning prevailing seasonal wind. Therefore, most of the races will be won by lofts, big and small, lining the west end boundary with speed as high as 50-100 meter per minute faster than pigeons from the middle and eastern parts which constitute the majority of the total entry (which means the drag has less effect than the wind, for the time being anyway due to the majority is still in the inner city). All due statistical analysis of race results also leads to the conclusion that there is a sheer advantage for lofts lining the west end, many of which have moved from other locations. It is interesting to note that for all races from the north, the flocks will fly past a town called Supanburi which is about 90 km northwest of the destination Bangkok about one hour earlier before they arrive home. Bangkok fanciers will constantly check the time of the first flocks with their Supanburi colleagues so that they can approximate the arrival time at destination. Training will mostly be done from this location as well. There are a small number of lofts in Supanburi, as well as lofts in other towns west of Bangkok, but they are not allowed to participate in the open race with the capital city folks for obvious reason- they will win. To collect more field data, we have not yet implemented this break point concept for the north route race although computer simulation with past race results

using break points coordinates from a location near Supanburi shows a much better distribution of prizes. In the next season, we shall experiment with this system in parallel with the conventional method until the majority of fanciers understand and appreciate the break point concept. An alternative to using the break point is to shift coordinates of the race point to the west slightly to reflect the angle of approach as had been done in the past.. This may sound arbitrarily but it is closer to reality and better than doing no adjustment at all. This approach is more appropriate when the front and the back club boundary lines are quite far i.e., greater than 25-30 km. The concept makes sense and although not 100% accurate (no system is anyway), it alleviates the plight of other zones.

#### **The Handicap System**

In some country, especially when racing against head wind in hot and humid condition, you can have a situation where the front liners will always win. This is particularly true for our races from the north east direction during the summer months of March through early May. As any one can predict, professional fanciers/punters set up their lofts in the northeastern most location and the lofts in other areas just stop racing. The end result is there are only a limited number of lofts in the advantageous location in the NE corner of some 25 km from center

of the city participating in this route which does not make it worth while for the club or association to organize the races. To win back the lofts situated further behind, we have tried using the so called "handicap system". This system assumes that all pigeons in the race fly the same distance for any specific race as if they were from the same loft. This distance is called "standard distance" which is measured from the front most boundary line to the race point. Therefore, every participating loft's air distance will be shorter than the standard distance. The "gap" or difference between a loft's air distance and the standard distance is then divided by an "assigned speed", say 1200 m/minute. The resulting time will then be used to subtract from the total time taken by a pigeon to fly its total race distance to that loft. The new result will be the time taken by that pigeon to cover the standard distance and from there the speed per minute that pigeon flies the standard distance can be calculated accordingly. The fastest one wins the race and so on. The "assigned speed" is the speed to be agreed upon by fanciers and the club based on a set criterion such as "50- 100 meter per minute slower than the average speed of the first 20 pigeons in that race" calculated by conventional method. Modern race software can do this very quickly in a wink or it can be done by exporting





initial race results to Microsoft Excel based program for further calculation and sorting. By using the "assigned speed" which must always be slower than the original race speed, lofts with longer distances will gain some advantage but by a very small margin. For instance, reducing the actual speed of 1400 m/minute to an assigned speed of 1350 m/minute, a loft located up front will give only 17 seconds more to a loft situated 10 km further back. The handicap given will not change the race result by that much but it gives people in the back some due respect and a better feeling. In a slow race the original speed will not be adjusted if it is below 900m/minute. This is because too slow an average speed does not reflect the real speed of a flying pigeon and in general, it already favors lofts in the back end.

We have found out that our handicap system is more or less the same method used in European national and international races where 800 m/minute is used as the assigned speed when the actual speeds of late arrivals, normally second or third day birds, are below 800 m/minute. A standard or reference distance is also established for every race. The time taken by a pigeon to cover the "gap" or difference between its loft distance and the standard distance will be added or subtracted from its original arrival time depending on whether the loft distance is shorter or longer. The adjusted arrival time will then be listed without being translated into m/minute again.

We hope our new approaches could be of some value to other countries/locations which have similar environment. There will certainly be some people who do not agree if their interest is compromised by any new initiative unless they are very sportive and cognizant of the future of the sport... However, some thing must be done to keep fanciers in the sport before they are discouraged by the inherent unfairness in the core of pigeon racing. We strongly urge the national and international organizations to think harder on this issue and to sponsor experiments using light weight GPS devices invented by NASA and/or one clock manufacturer to track flight path of pigeons fighting side wind or head wind. The said devices weigh about 35 gram, still very heavy compared with the body weight but can serve the purpose if mounted on strong and well trained pigeons. They should endorse or even suggest any new initiatives suitable to particular locations to promote a more equitable play ground

Another noteworthy article on "Handicap System" by Barry Trewins can be found in his website, [www.malleeclassic.com](http://www.malleeclassic.com). for pigeon racing. We encourage the readers to look for an article named "Points Mean Prizes" written by a senior British fancier Nigel Lane, (*This article will feature in next months Journal*). You'll learn a lot of neglected facts in pigeon racing

Your comments are welcome.

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### **Note from Tom Wills (Publicity Officer - Central Cumberland Federation)**

*Our Federation Transporter has been modified to provide more airflow to pigeons and weather cover and safety features for liberator. To date race returns have been rather good. With most flyers recording excellent returns. Federation Liberation protocol seems to be working well, birds have only been held over on one occasion because of strong cousting winds, excellent returns next day on the Sunday. Liberation Committee are not putting over pigeons at risk if in doubt- hold over.*

*I would like to give a Cheerio to Bob Appleby who at 84 is still winning at Liverpool Club and featuring in Federation Top 20, also winning a very strong section D of Fed. For those that are not aware Bob has experienced some ill health in the past few years but this has not stopped him winning a Club Short Average and some good races no doubt with his wonderful wife Josephine giving Bob every assistance, he may well be aiming for his 5th National Win in his New federation. He has a great record 4 National Wins and 12 seconds plus many others, Keep up the good work Josephine and Bob.*

